

# COUNTY OF YORK

## MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** September 25, 2000

**TO:** York County Board of Supervisors

**FROM:** Daniel M. Stuck, County Administrator

**SUBJECT:** Route 17 Widening – Fort Eustis Boulevard to Coleman Bridge

As the Board is aware, the Virginia Department of Transportation is pursuing a project that would widen Route 17 between Fort Eustis Boulevard and the Coleman Bridge from four to six lanes. The project first appeared in the State Primary Roads Six-Year Plan in June 1992 and was listed under the very general heading of "Approaches to the Coleman Bridge." This occurred after the decision had been made to widen the Coleman Bridge to four lanes, rather than construct the upriver crossing that the County had supported for many years. It should be noted that the "Approaches to the Coleman Bridge" project listing was added not at the County's request but on the State's initiative, presumably somewhat in response to the County's long-standing position that the Route 17 corridor needed improvement. The County's position dated back at least to 1987 when a traffic analysis documented \$30 million in capacity enhancements (turning lanes, widening in certain locations, etc.) along the entire corridor, basically as "stop-gap" measures until the southernmost segments could be widened to six-lanes. Consequently, the County's annual requests at the Commonwealth Transportation Board Pre-allocation Hearings had consistently included references to the need to widen the southern segments of Route 17 to six lanes.

Up until this year the project was identified in the VDOT Six Year Transportation Plan funding documents as a \$37 million project. According to last year's Allocation Plan as approved by the Commonwealth Transportation Board, the total project amount was listed as \$37,405,000 with \$31,670,000 having been accumulated for the project through previous funding allocations. Interestingly, and very puzzling, in the Tentative Allocation Plan released by VDOT on September 20, 2000, the project is shown as having a total cost of \$18,603,000 with previous allocations of \$18,282,000. Staff is in the process of making inquiries to VDOT to find out what happened to the \$13,388,000 in previous allocations that have disappeared.

The County has supported for many years the widening of Fort Eustis Boulevard (Route 105) west of Route 17 as a way to "improve the approaches" to the Coleman Bridge and, as early as 1989 there had been conceptual discussion of a new connector ("diversion") between Route 105 and Route 17 west of the Edgehill subdivision. The theory behind this was that it would be a sufficiently direct route to the Coleman Bridge that it could encourage commuters to use Route 105 and I-64 and avoid the very congested sections of Route 17 in the Grafton and Tabb areas of the County. After the "Approaches to the Coleman Bridge" project listing and allocation appeared in the 1992 Six-Year Plan, the County's annual Pre-Allocation Hearing requests began supporting the "Route 17 Traffic Diversion" with the understanding that it was, in fact, the new route. None of the listings in the resolutions adopted by the Board concerning its Primary Road program referred to widening this segment to six lanes. At the same time, the County was consistently

supporting and requesting the widening of the southern segments of Route 17 to six lanes with specific references to that effect.

In 1998, it was becoming increasingly apparent to staff tracking the progress of the "Approaches to the Coleman Bridge" project that VDOT would not consider pursuing a new linkage between Routes 105 and Route 17 (the "diversion" route) and was focused on widening the road to six lanes. In November 1998 with the Board's approval, I sent a letter (copy attached) to Mr. Quintin Elliott, Resident Engineer, expressing the County's desire that the widening between Route 105 and the Coleman Bridge be deferred in favor of more modest capacity/safety enhancements such as turn lane installations or extensions, shoulder widening, etc. Furthermore, the letter suggests that the funds saved by doing so be used for improvements (such as widening to six lanes) to Route 17 in the Grafton and Tabb areas (where the County has consistently requested that funds be allocated). Mr. Elliott's response, dated December 22, 1998 and also attached, indicated that the "Department's position [is] to continue with the project as scheduled" but that traffic demand studies were still underway and VDOT would be examining the "no build" alternative for the project, or segments of it. As a result of this response, I recommended, and the Board concurred, that the County's support for projects in both the 1999 and 2000 Pre-Allocation Hearing processes not include any reference to the Route 17 "Diversion" project (i.e., the work north of Fort Eustis Boulevard).

Throughout this year it has become increasingly apparent that VDOT is proceeding "full-steam-ahead" with the plans to widen Route 17 north of Fort Eustis Boulevard. Staff has been in several meetings with VDOT officials where this position has been evident and preliminary design drawings are being prepared and have been made available to County staff and property owners. However, the project has not progressed to the public hearing stages, so there have been no opportunities for the input referred to in Mr. Elliott's 1998 letter. Also disturbing is the fact that all of this planning and effort related to widening Route 17 on the York County side is proceeding while there is no specific project or funding for similar improvements on the Gloucester side of the bridge. As Mr. Wiggins recently indicated in a question to Mr. Elliott, it doesn't seem to make sense to have four lanes (i.e., Fort Eustis Boulevard and lower Route 17) feeding into six lanes feeding into four lanes. Mr. Elliott responded by saying that the Coleman Bridge was capable of carrying six lanes of traffic. However, even if that is done, there is nothing in the foreseeable future that would alleviate the same "bottleneck" situation just a little further north on the Gloucester side of the bridge.

My recent letters to Senators Norment and Williams were prompted by concern about this situation. If the segment of Route 17 between Fort Eustis Boulevard and the bridge were available for development and subject to the capacity limitations that development can bring, widening to six lanes might make sense. However, as you know, the majority of this segment of the corridor is bordered by National Park Service property and will remain open space. There are very few roads feeding into Route 17 in this segment, and those that do serve areas that will not grow significantly (because of federal property). The road carries traffic well and doesn't experience the backups and congestion that characterize the southern segments of the corridor. In staff's opinion, it should not carry a higher priority than improvements to the southern segments of the corridor. Basically, the question

is....why would VDOT or the County want to spend hard-to-come-by funds to improve the least congested segment of Route 17 in York County? While, as Mr. Elliott mentioned at the Board's last meeting, spot improvements are being made on the southern segments of the corridor (e.g., the third northbound lane in the Washington Square area), the necessary capacity enhancements will take years at the rate of "a million here and a million there." Conversely, diverting a major portion of the already programmed Route 17 improvement funds to these high priority areas could address the problems in a more comprehensive fashion. My hope in writing Senators Norment and Williams was that they might be able to prompt some discussion about alternative needs and the priorities for use of the Commonwealth's limited transportation improvement funds.

It is important to note that the County's concern is one of priorities rather than long-term need. The County's 1991 Comprehensive Plan indicated a long-term objective of widening Route 17 to six lanes from the Newport News City line to the York River. The same long-term objective is contained in the 1999 Comprehensive Plan. Likewise, the regional transportation plans supported by the County and adopted by the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission over the past 15-20 years have indicated that Route 17 should eventually be widened to six lanes. However, the County has consistently indicated that priorities should be given to the southern segments of the corridor, a position that was most recently given by the County to the Commonwealth Transportation Board in July of this year. These southern segments (i.e., in the Grafton and Tabb areas) are the most heavily congested and exhibit an immediate and much greater need for safety and capacity improvements than the segment north of Route 105.

The most recent iteration of the regional transportation plan (the 2020 Plan) is currently undergoing its air quality conformity review analysis. This is a necessary step prior to presenting the Plan to the Metropolitan Planning Organization (the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission) for adoption. The widening of Route 17 (the entire corridor) is included as one of the projects in this plan. In recent discussions with HRPDC staff, it has come to my attention that VDOT cannot proceed with a project if it is not included in the regional transportation plan. Therefore, one option available to the County would be to recommend that the proposed regional plan be amended to delete the 6-lane project for the segment of Route 17 north of Fort Eustis Boulevard. Since Route 17 is a "regional" corridor there is no guarantee that the other members of the MPO (in particular, Gloucester might object) would agree to the change, however, it could be proposed. Unfortunately, while this strategy might result in VDOT not being able to proceed with this particular segment, there is no guarantee that the allocated funds would be re-directed to the southern segments of Route 17. Instead, all that is guaranteed is that the funds would be available for some primary road project in the region. The decision on how those funds would be re-allocated rests solely with the Commonwealth Transportation Board.

### Recommendation

I continue to believe that there are much higher priorities for widening on the Route 17 corridor than the segment north of Fort Eustis Boulevard, that capacity enhancements could be made at a cost much less than the amount allocated to the project, and that it would be much more beneficial to the County and the regional transportation network if the

“savings” were used for widening the southern segments of the corridor. If the Board continues to agree with this position, I believe it would be appropriate to adopt a resolution so stating that can be forwarded to the Commonwealth Transportation Board, the County’s legislative delegation and others. Proposed Resolution No. 00-165 is attached for consideration.

I also recommend that the Board authorize me to have discussions with my counterparts in the region, HRPDC staff and VDOT officials, including our local representative on the Commonwealth Transportation Board, concerning the possibility of the County withdrawing its support for this particular project listing in the regional transportation plan. While this strategy could lead to an inability by VDOT to proceed, it could also lead to highway improvement funds “exiting” York County since it is the Commonwealth Transportation Board that controls the allocation process. I would like to learn more about the opportunities for and probability of the funds being re-directed to lower Route 17 before advising the Board to take this approach and, after conducting these discussions, believe I would be better able to discuss the alternatives and consequences. If the Board is agreeable, I will attempt to do this and report back within 60 days.

Please let me know if you have questions or would like additional information.

Carter/3337:jmc

Attachments